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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 005287

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [ELN](#)

SUBJECT: COLOMBIA: GROUP OF FRIENDS FOR ELN PEACE PROCESS
REACTIVATED BY CUBA, THEN DEACTIVATED BY NORWAY

REF: BOGOTA 4466

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Norwegian charge Sigurd Endresen provided further details to polcouns about the December 2004 reactivation of the Group of Friends for the ELN peace process and deactivation four months later, as well as about Cuban efforts, via the group, to replace Mexico as facilitator. Endresen admitted that the Cuban Ambassador deceived his counterparts claiming GOC knowledge and support of his ongoing contacts with the ELN when this was not the case, particularly regarding the late March ELN proposal for direct talks with the GOC in a "mediator country." By early April, a fed up Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo asked the Norwegians, in their capacity as group coordinator, to terminate the group's efforts. With the consent of the others, the Norwegians shut it down. However, the GOC has appealed to these countries, in particular to Norway, to support the peace process on a bilateral basis. End Summary.

12. (C) On May 20, Polcouns met with Norwegian Ambassador to Colombia (resident in Venezuela) Martin Bjordal and charge Sigurd Endresen to discuss the temporary re-activation of the Group of Friends for the ELN peace process at the end of 2004 and subsequent de-activation by Norway shortly after it became coordinator on April 1. The Group of Friends consists of Cuba, France, Norway, Spain and Switzerland.

13. (C) Endresen said the group was revived in 2003 at the request of the Swiss, with the support of the GOC and the ELN. Little was accomplished subsequently. When Mexico was designated as facilitator for talks with the ELN in June 2004, President Uribe told the group it could remain intact as passive observers.

14. (C) According to Endresen, at the behest of Cuba, the group reactivated itself in December 2004. France was coordinator at the time. Per reftel, Cuban Ambassador Luis Hernandez Ojeda remained in regular contact with ELN spokesman "Francisco Galan" (Gerardo Antonio Bermudez Sanchez) on behalf of the group. On March 24, the group received a draft communication from the ELN proposing direct talks between the ELN's Central Command (COCE) and the GOC in a "mediator country." The ELN proposal became public on March 26. The ELN also wanted Group of Friends' public endorsement. The Cubans repeatedly told the others that the GOC already knew of the ELN proposal, had endorsed it, and that the ELN communication could be considered a "text negotiated with the GOC." The group subsequently found out that this was not the case. Endresen said the group kept in regular contact with the Mexican Embassy but conceded they were "a bit late" in informing the GOC about their ELN contacts on the statement, mostly because the Cubans had told them the GOC was already aware.

15. (C) On April 2, Peace Commissioner Restrepo called the Norwegians, in their capacity as coordinator, to express concern that the group was meeting ELN representatives without consulting the GOC. According to Endresen, Restrepo said the GOC was using Mexico as the official facilitator, a different approach from the group of friends format. Nonetheless, if the group was being pulled into negotiations by the ELN, Restrepo expected it remain in constant touch with him, to receive "negotiating instructions." He asked to see Endresen on April 7 and in that follow-on meeting, Restrepo pulled the plug. He told the Norwegian that a group of countries was not workable as a facilitator and asked it to cease contacts with the ELN and dissolve itself. He also asked Norway to convey to each country individually GOC interest in their involvement in the peace process on a bilateral basis. Restrepo suggested that countries support the paramilitary demobilization process, demining efforts, or reintegration of demobilized combatants. Endresen told Restrepo he would suspend further activity by the group and convey the GOC request for bilateral support.

16. (C) Endresen said the group of friends had two meetings following the Norwegian-declared suspension. One was with former Mexican facilitator Andres Valencia (the Cubans did not attend, Endresen noted), and the second among themselves, at which point they decided there was no further reason to meet.

17. (C) Endresen said Cuban Ambassador Luis Hernandez Ojeda has continued to be in contact with ELN's Galan. He admitted that the other four ambassadors were naive in their initial dealings with Hernandez Ojeda because he had been in Colombia five years and they "had a tendency to listen to him and defer to his judgment." Following the episode over the March 26 communication from the ELN, the others reached the conclusion that the Cubans were not being transparent. By the time the ELN rejected Mexican facilitation on April 17 reportedly because of Mexico's vote against Cuba at the UN Commission on Human Rights, it became clear what Cuban objectives had been. Endresen said the group had contemplated ejecting Cuba but the French made the argument that the group had no leverage without the Cubans and their close, traditional links to the ELN.

18. (C) On May 26, Ambassador Bjorndal, the Norwegian MFA director for Latin American affairs, and Endresen met with Restrepo and Foreign Minister Barco to discuss Norway's bilateral role in the peace process. Restrepo and Barco spent 90 minutes with them, reviewing their efforts with the ELN, and their reasons for believing the group of friends was not workable. They encouraged Norway to contribute technical assistance to the peace process and requested GON "acompanamiento" in the months ahead. Endresen said the GON was favorably disposed to considering how it could contribute.

19. (C) Endresen agreed to keep the Embassy appraised of any further activity on the part of the group and of GON thinking regarding its own potential support for the peace process.

110. (C) Comment: Local Norwegian diplomats remain interested in playing a constructive role in the Colombian peace process. Their engagement and support should be encouraged, in particular for demobilization and reinsertion efforts.

WOOD